



red turns to blue, blue turns to red
Meichen Waxer

For Monkey, the kitten that Lara, Merve and I lost our shit over every day for two weeks, but who is a symbol of the ways in which small, scrappy, but persistent things survive and infiltrate the systems that try to displace them in the first place.

I'd like to acknowledge the following folks, who without, this microcosm of ideas, gestures and events would not have transpired. Brynn McNab, whom I begun Arts Assembly with, and initiated this project of examining how to hold. Bridgette Badowich, who co-ran Arts Assembly with me for the duration of a year, and who acted as great support in this project. My partners at halka sanat projesi, for undertaking this exchange with us, Ipek Çankaya and Segzi Alabi. Merve Ünsal and Lara Ögel, who throughout the year have worked with each other and myself on exploring how to articulate holding through an artistic practice. Sasha J. Langford for writing and speaking at our PLOT residency at Access Gallery as well as Damla Tamer for being our artist-in-residence during our time in PLOT. Access Gallery for being our home for three months. As well I'd like to acknowledge the texts of Gregory Shollette, Celine Condorelli, Anne Carson, Merve Ünsal, Lara Ögel, Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar, Margaret Atwood, Carol Mavor, and Jalal Toufic for providing a language to articulate with.

When I first presented a version of this writing at a talk at The Vancouver Book Art Fair in 2018, I baked and offered challah, a traditional bread for me. I served it with Turkish rose jam. This nod to 'bread and roses', was my most direct way of holding space for others on that day.



Summer 2017, we lost our home, and our home no longer made any sense. We asked ourselves how we could hold space for others without having any visible walls, floors you could walk on, and a door you could shut? How could we, Arts Assembly, exist as a nomadic entity? These questions led to the two year partnership *Common Ground / Uyuşma Temeli*, with halka sanat projesi, a modest scale artist residency center and community-oriented gallery located in Istanbul, Turkey. In each year of the partnership, the hosting organization would provide logistic, spatial, language, and community support for the guest: to hold stable a space outside of one's immediate community, culture, country; to explore and ask questions in a global context. The project thus far has manifested in an incredibly rich year of research, which I have been able to think through, move through, and breathe through. I will do my best to elucidate these thoughts, which I am still absorbing and processing.

In the summer of 2017, we approached separately Merve Ünsal and Lara Ögel to make work in response to holding space in a precarious financial and socio-political climate. I became aware of Merve through her online journal m-est.org, which concentrates on contemporary art writing, and criticism on and by Turkish artists. Lara was recommended to me as an artist to work with by our partner at halka sanat projesi, İpek Çankaya, who has a great sensitivity to my aesthetic concerns.

Coincidentally, Merve and Lara are close friends, and this project provided a framework for their ongoing exchange of thoughts and ideas to coalesce into work. Both Lara and Merve have been gaining significant momentum in their practice, sustaining and developing their work in part through a continuous leaving and returning to Istanbul. Our interactions called into question for me my own curatorial inquiry of examining systems of support and resistance in a city that seems to require constantly coming back to—and within that, a leaving. Over the year through emails, calls, and a visit in Toronto, Merve, Lara and I thought together.

Fortuitously, Arts Assembly was invited to have an organizational residency in PLOT at Access Gallery over the summer months of 2018, overlapping with the planned exhibition in Istanbul. The first year of *Common Ground | Uyuşma Temeli* is under the subtitle *Tutma | Hold*. During our three-month residency we held reading groups, invited Sasha J. Langford to speak, hosted Damla Tamer as an artist-in-residence, and shared PLOT with Danielle LaFrance for her *#postdildo* series. We thought about how this resource could host and nurture in different ways. How could this residency be an act of resistance? Could sharing space and redistributing our budget into artist fees and a contribution to halka's rent in Istanbul hold steady space, bodies and ideas?

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On 26 July, Sasha J. Langford spoke at PLOT as a part of *Tutma | Hold*. She presented a piece of writing titled *With: Two Histories of Solitude*. This writing considered the political-economic implications of object relations theory. I was choked when she spoke of the Henry Harlow love experiments with a monkey. The monkey, denied the intimacy of another monkey, formed instead in this absence great attachment to a piece of terrycloth. The cloth provided a proxy of touch, the support this monkey searched for, I imagine to feel its own existence—if we can entertain the idea that non-human animals have capacity to be self aware. I became painfully conscious of this teddy bear I have clung to at night. As single gay woman and rape survivor, accepting reciprocal intimacy has been a steep learning curve, parsing out what is conditioned versus what is desired. What is readily available

versus what I can and want to give back to. This bear is imprinted, is bruised, by my body growing around it throughout my life. Has the proxy of support this bear has offered, through its stuffed familiarity, in turn short-circuited noticing a lack of reciprocal intimacy for stretches of time in my life? If I had no bear to cling to, would I feel a greater urgency to find one that can cling back, speak back, care back? What if my structure of support could have agency to choose to show up? Choose to hold space, and have the ability to understand when it is no longer needed?



Artist and Writer Céline Condorelli argues that to act in support is to eventually disappear. She states: "...this intimacy entails some violence as well, the violence of support: providing and being supportive implies



not only being in contact, but being right up against the subject of concern, and taking it on-board, making common cause with it. To work in support also means working towards the hypothetical disappearance of a lack, of the need of support, which are the basis for this intimacy in the first place: once more, against it,"¹

Can I drive forward an organization that works for its eventual disappearance? Can this be done in a way that doesn't feel like I am trying to martyr myself and Arts Assembly in complete altruism for others? Is it feasible for structural, organizational, and cultural producers to support and hold space in a symbiotic manner? Could this relationship structure privilege reciprocity over immediate capital, both cultural and monetary? Perhaps within building capacity to hold, and with a continued effort to support practices, Arts Assembly—and

consequently, I—can grow to hold more. Become more supportive. This is slightly reductive, and clearly when folks are provided the tools and monetary means to carry out projects, there is likely a greater success. Though what I am proposing is not a sheer 'growing in scale to do more'; but rather a figuring out of a way in which alternative modes of support operate as reciprocally intimate. In this mode of understanding support, I think that an aim of Arts Assembly is plurality, to privilege a multitude of narratives. To enable reciprocal relationships through reflective, evolving and research-driven programming, this structure of support that Arts Assembly offers as a small organization could be filled and refilled, shifted and mutated by others. Resolving that there is not one aim of support in mind, yet a myriad of ways of working towards growing capacity for support, perhaps the waxing and waning of support needed within our community would shift how Arts Assembly holds and shares space.

"... we are experiencing a phase of long-overdue reflection, advocacy and action focused on the working conditions of artists and cultural workers. This reaction is spurred on by the chronically unmanageable repercussions of the financial collapse. But if cultural labor's response is to rise above the important, though limited, need to improve the distribution of art world benefits by addressing deeper structural and political concerns, it may depend on our ability to link present conditions of bare art to the crisis and delirium of capital,"

—Gregory Sholette, *Delirium and Resistance: Activist Art and the Crisis of Capitalism* (2017)

Where Does It Hurt, a text by Merve Ünsal has profoundly marked me. In early conversations surrounding *Tutma | Hold*, Merve spoke to me about this text she was working on, of thinking through pain and its hosting bodies. On how we hold and make sense and move through these bodies—these bodies being her own, the state, and the landscape. December 2017, I sat in Saint Lawrence Market, Toronto, inhaling cabbage rolls with Merve, and she spoke to me of this writing. This writing that began to bruise me before I'd read its words. She spoke to me of her great grandfather to whom she bears an uncanny

resemblance to; who had a history of war and genocide which she did not know how to hold. Months later when I received a draft of the text, I read:

“This encounter led me to think about notions of passing on and our ability to receive what is passed on to us. I have my great-grandfather’s eyes and complexion, the same angular features and oval face. I never met him. He was an armed guerrilla fighter during WWI as a Kurdish tribesman, who was the head of one of the largest Kurdish tribes in what was then called Urfa. During WWI, the tail end of which became the Independence War in Turkey, Hacı Ömer led his men in battle, defeating the French troops, freeing the city. The city became “Sanlıurfa” (Urfa the Glorious) by the parliament’s decree, acknowledging and recognizing the local resistance. My great-grandfather’s contributions and leadership in this battle was awarded the Medal of Independence—a special military decoration to pay tribute to achievements during the Independence War.

If my great grandfather was an armed local leader during the liberation of Urfa in early 1920, it is possible to deduce that he was a man of influence, power, weapons in 1915 when Armenians were massacred across the Eastern and South-Eastern parts of Turkey. In the “best” case scenario, Hacı Ömer did not do anything to prevent the genocide. In the “worst” case scenario, he was an active participant. Within the active participation, there are also morally dubious layers.

...He most probably played a locally vast role in the Armenian genocide. (Is there any such thing as local in genocide? Or killing? Isn’t killing essentially a local act?),”

—Merve Ünsal, *Where Does It Hurt* (2018)

Lara and Merve made a series of gestures together, and when we began installation we were informed halka was being renovated, and it was some sort of poetic justice that the last exhibition focused on efforts of how to hold space, that space. halka sanat projesi, located in

Kadıköy, has felt a fate too familiar to that which the neighbourhood's many racialized folk, queers, and artists have historically occupied. The sense of community and local economy stimulates a desirability to be captured into a larger and often faceless gentrification. The leftist ideology, fish market and underground music and art scene had made Kadıköy an ideal candidate for approximately one coffee shop every three paces.

On the first floor of the gallery, Merve and Lara created a series of cyanotypes from the light entering the space, arranging them like a patchwork quilt on the floor. The second floor, lit with red lights, housed a re-creation of the building's structural column in Saran Wrap, and a projection of Lake Tuz, a salt lake in Turkey in which an algae bloom turned the water red, blood red. Throughout the space, an audio recording played in which they read, in Turkish, texts they had written. Merve and Lara provided me with written translations so I could take in their writings of magic, death, light, bodies, memory, the ways we hold and the ways in which we ask to be held. On red. On blue.

Merve and Lara captured the light as the streets of Istanbul were flooded with the late afternoon sun. Quietly seizing the light at golden hour, I think of how the photographer must wait for what is considered the most valuable light. That at a certain time, this light is worth more. Do these impressions have more currency? The subtle shapes caught on the fabric echoed abstract art of the 60's, reminding me of what became known as a minimalist feminist aesthetic, a move towards the serious and a rejection of the ornate. Merve and Lara remarked that they loved the feminized nature of the materials, the utilitarian nature of cloth and Saran wrap. Are being pragmatic and flexible qualities of the feminine? The ability to make due without much, is this also a feminized act?

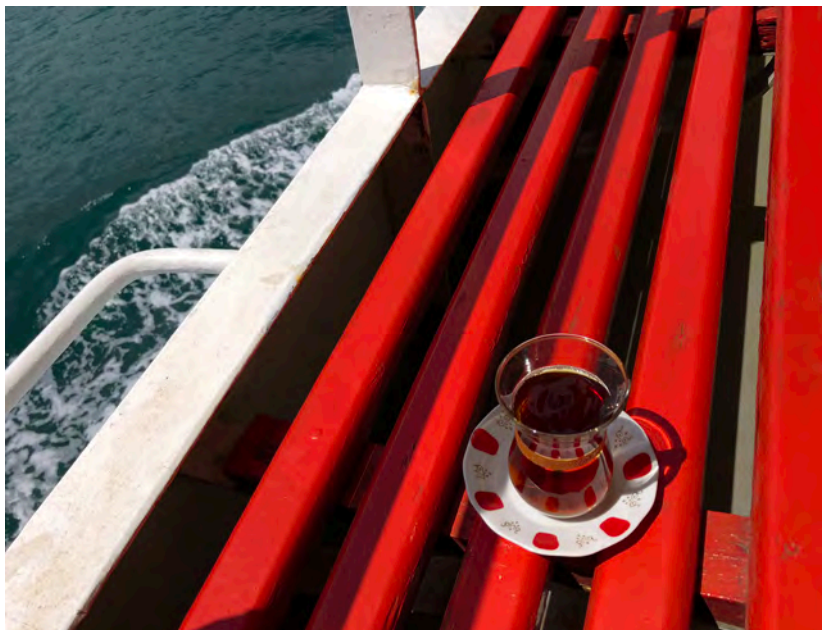
There I sat in Istanbul, witnessing the collapsing economy, feeling first hand that nothing is fixed. As Merve spoke, *blue was turning to red*.

Red is the colour of love, protest, violence, of life. To be in the red is to be in debt. Can we support while in debt? I think of all those ready to support, to organize and to push up against precarious social and economic systems; these folks are often in debt or at least not

benefiting from expropriation, rental spikes and lack of jobs. It makes sense that feeling unsupported and not-held can either make one recoil into individualism or otherwise join forces and seek new models of being.

Can a column made of Saran Wrap offer the same support as one that bears weight? Do we just have to know it is there in order to feel its support? Like an ally? Or is a structure so fragile a symbol for the precarity we face in our times? The fortunate folk consume people, places, trends, ideas, objects, lives at an incalculable rate. How can something become a monument of tomorrow? Will the tourist sites remain the same? Are we moving so fast that we won't leave a mark?

Blue, I stared at the water as I crossed almost daily between Europe and Asia. This border, so easy to traverse with a small boat where I frequently had a likewise small meal from a man announcing "cay, portakal, simit". This border to me felt arbitrary. Is a border a form of support, does it resist? Is it juvenile to think of what a borderless world could look like? Perhaps the internet gives a false sense of democracy,



and that in some realms, we share space equally. But it doesn't take long to return to the awareness that access to technology and literacy are not a given. That we have borders like the edges of our body, like the water on shore—not entirely fixed, but with some continuity and some sense of recognition.

Red. Dorothy's shoes were changed to Ruby from Silver to take advantage of the invention of technicolor; Lara reminded me of this fact, this detail they carried into *Return to Oz*. A movie that, again, has bruised me deeply. Like a great drought, Princess Mombi turned the citizens of Oz to statues. They were held static, unable to protest, their own bodies forming a great resistance against their will. In *Return to Oz*, closer to the books of L. Frank Baum, Dorothy is seen as insane for believing in Oz. Are we insane to believe we can have different circumstances in which we might live? To imagine a world with a different set of structures and which doesn't privilege one configuration of human existence? Blue, Dorothy returns to Oz at the start of this film, carried on a current from the riverbed of the Santorum in her escape from electroshock therapy. But in the end, her ruby slippers bring her home. Red.

Lara and Merve's installation brought the words *film, shell, skin, tear, stain, blue, red, patch, reside* and *hold* to my mouth. In the soon-to-be evicted walls of halka, we shared in a panel discussion and a reading group about what it is to hold in space and in the body. The bruise is a wound that heals from the inside out, that has shades of blue and red within. The body holds the bruise until it is done. Like a support that is no longer needed.

"Sometimes, between the time of the pain and when the bruise presents itself, we forget the injury. I am trying to not forget. Bruises are the before-time wound of always-falling childhood and the after-time of growing old. (It takes so little to bruise the elderly. A bruise is an injury that is neither inside, nor outside,"

—Carol Mavor, *Black and Blue: The Bruising Passion of Camera Lucida, La Jete, Sans Soleil, and Hiroshima Mon Amour* (2012)

While I was in Istanbul, Damla Tamer took over PLOT for a residency. She coincidentally made cyanotypes. She dyed the pigment pink, and within the light she captured the shapes of nipple covers and breast feeding pads; outlining objects made to conceal the shame of the body, the feminized body that leaks and protrudes—those parts of the body that we hide like a bruise to avoid speculation of the source of impact, the source of pain.

The prints of the nipple covers reminded me of the jellyfish I'd stare at while waiting for my boat to depart in Kadıköy. The water that was once so swimmable, now taboo to enter. Blue turns to red. In Istanbul, I went to an historical photograph- and ephemera-filled exhibition at Pera Museum about the former beaches and swimming spots along the Bosphorus. The nostalgic text, swimsuits, images and displays of sand conjured sadness. A true melancholy for longing to know Istanbul in this way. I resisted this romanticization, knowing that in my small way, I am implicated in the un-swimmable water; that the cargo ships traversing the Bosphorus are filled with clothes and sunglasses I outfit myself in. Between the name brand stores are storeys of malls filled with defected clothes, not good enough to be in *Zara* or *Top Shop*, but fine enough to enter into this flexible economy. The clothes that were too defected to hang on racks end up in piles on tables on the exterior or basement levels of these malls. I asked Lara what happens to all these clothes, and she said they simply lay around until someone buys them.

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Months have passed since Istanbul; my daily walks of ten to twenty kilometers in temperatures above thirty-five degrees with eighty percent humidity are still felt on my body. I wanted to feel the scale of the city, in some way. To hold in my body the landscape. To traverse it in a way that acknowledged I was a guest, a temporary visitor. My body still aches for Istanbul, a city I have perhaps a one-sided relationship with, as I feel like I have received so much from it but have not been able to give back on the same scale. I've thought about how this layering of ideas and individuals has complicated my questions. That I am no better at articulating an answer, but clearer on an urgency to align myself, Arts Assembly, to be in support, and that this support cannot be fixed but is somehow stable enough to be felt.



Endnotes:

1: Céline Condorelli, *Support Structures* (2009)

Images by Meichen Waxer